



# K-12 Writing - Leadership

## Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework – Writing (Writing Framework)

*School leaders strategically prioritize efforts to optimize the attainment of writing goals for all students*

	Goals	Assessment	Instruction	Leadership	Professional Development	Commitment
Schools						
Districts						
State						

### Five Functions of School Leadership for Promoting Writing Outcomes:

School leaders ensure the alignment of writing instruction to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and

- ★ Actively lead efforts to improve student writing outcomes and meet the K-12 CCSS in Writing
- ★ Demonstrate commitment to and prioritization of strong writing outcomes for all students
- ★ Provide strong support for effective writing assessment and instructional practices
- ★ Allocate and manage school resources to support high-quality writing instruction
- ★ Provide effective professional development (training, collaboration, supervision and support) to support improved writing instruction.

Although other school-level leaders play important roles, **the principal's leadership and actions most directly foster efforts to improve academic outcomes**. Therefore, the principal and other school leaders, acting together with the principal leading the initiative, can support teachers to help students improve writing performance and achieve higher levels of writing proficiency than previously thought possible. **What makes the difference between routine results and accelerated achievement?** The answer: There are several variables that schools have the ability to change that will have a significant influence on how well students learn effective writing skills and approaches. Each variable is described briefly below as a function of school leadership for promoting positive writing outcomes.

## Function 1: School Leaders Actively Lead Efforts to Improve Student Writing Outcomes and Meet the K-12 CCSS in Writing

Direct involvement and active support by leaders is the best way to communicate the importance of improvement and the seriousness with which improvement in writing outcomes is regarded in the school. A principal can best convey his/her intention to promote improved writing outcomes by enlisting **co-leaders and leadership teams**. Extensive involvement and significant support can be generated by engaging grade-level, department-level, and school-wide leadership teams to work toward high-level writing performance. This distributed leadership model, in conjunction with (a) school-wide improvement goals aligned to the K-12 Common Core State Standards for Writing, (b) the use of data to guide instructional decisions, and (c) the incorporation of structured collaboration within and across teams, provides a powerful structure for achieving high priority writing goals. In schools with a large number of English learners, teams (at the grade-, department- or school-level) should include staff from the English as a Second Language Department and staff who provide support to students in their native language to better ensure coordination among departments.

Another strong strategy for promoting improvement in student writing outcomes is actively **modeling a clear, compelling and consistent example that all staff can see**—an example that demonstrates leaders' knowledge of effective practices in writing instruction and their belief in the importance of writing to students' future success. The power of this can be demonstrated in practice when leaders and teachers engage in writing and share their own writing publicly (e.g., the use of a persuasive open letter to students and parents about the importance of writing as a life skill). When building leaders and teachers share their writing with others openly, it offers two important learning opportunities for students. It lets students see the value in sharing writing with others, and it can give students vivid examples of effective writing for authentic purposes.

## Function 2: School Leaders Demonstrate Commitment to and Prioritization of Strong Writing Outcomes for All Students

**Commitment** begins with planning (i.e., making standards, goals and strategies clear to all stakeholders) and continues as commitments are written in a public document such as a **School Writing Plan**. Good plans begin with goals informed by current data and with strategies derived from evidence-based sources. Planning is an inclusive process that must be informed by available data and by relevant, rigorous research. An inclusive, strategic planning process, with goals specified by data-based decisions, results in a plan that is specific from the outset, evolves over time, and is always focused on the goal of developing good student writing skills.

**Developing the plan** is only the first step of the improvement process. Fully **implementing the plan over time**—and guiding its evolution—is essential to attaining the plan’s goals. Essentially, school leaders must lead implementation efforts, actively and consistently working to carry out the plan’s strategies through to completion. School leaders assume the responsibility for implementation and an on-going planning process that evolves as data are collected and changes occur in the school. For example, an ongoing planning process is required to consider any potential impact from new cohorts of students and staff changes that occur. On-going planning must also take into account the diversity of the student population. For example, in schools with a large English learner population, specific goals and strategies should be considered to ensure that English learners are also receiving high quality instruction tailored to their specific language needs.

**A School Writing Plan is organized around the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Writing**, district-level requirements (including school board policies or district procedures), school-level norms and expectations—in essence, the writing skills students need for future success. School leaders who use research-based sources to develop a School Writing Plan will have the necessary foundation to build a strong writing improvement initiative.

It is important that the **goals specified in the plan are realistic and attainable**. For example, if a group of English learners begins with very low language skills, they likely require support in language and writing that goes beyond the time typically allocated for writing instruction. Without **tailored support**, such students will lag behind and may never catch up.

Finally, **commitment and prioritization must be communicated publicly**. When leaders communicate with stakeholders about a) the importance of students’ writing ability to their future success, b) the leaders’ vision for a school focused on writing success for all students, c) the ways in which the school staff intend to work toward increased student writing achievement, and d) the roles parents play in supporting this goal, they create a synergistic force that greatly increases the likelihood of success.

With a collective vision and cohesive school culture, there is support for writing achievement by design. Writing achievement, therefore, becomes framed around a culture where **“this is how we do things here with respect to writing.”** If a school community of staff, students, parents, district leaders and other stakeholders are constantly engaged with goals, ideas, activities, support and encouragement focused on helping students become successful writers, the result will be a synergy that drives the initiative from vision to reality.

### **Function 3: School Leaders Provide Strong Support for Effective Writing Assessment and Instructional Practices**

As noted above, school leaders must **monitor implementation of the writing assessment and instructional practices outlined in the School Writing Plan**. Where current practice does not match the intent stated in the plan, leaders must help teachers conform practice to the goals and objectives specified in the plan. Specifically, leaders can promote strong writing instruction by supporting implementation focused on the K-12 CCSS for Writing, school- and district writing requirements, and the instructional recommendations of key research-based national reports and documents on effective writing instruction as discussed in the *K-12 Writing Instruction* chapter (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2008). For example, recommendations that would support an alignment between classroom instruction and the plan might include practices such as: (a) including a clear

focus on writing and coordination of writing instruction across all grade levels, (b) integrating writing into all subject areas, (c) teaching students to write in a variety of genres, (d) providing students with opportunities to engage in authentic writing, and (e) including writing opportunities targeting different audiences and purposes (Graham & Perin, 2007; NCTE, 2008).

A successful writing improvement initiative also requires that **writing instruction is differentiated based on student needs** (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; NCTE, 2008). Differentiation can be accomplished by strategically adjusting the amount of time provided for writing instruction and practice, the size of writing tutorial groups, the scaffolds or supports provided for writing, and the specificity of the feedback provided. A successful plan also addresses the language needs of English learners and provides any needed support with vocabulary, syntax, and other language-related issues.

Leaders assure that technically-adequate writing measures are administered and consistent and trustworthy interpretations are made about student performance. They also **promote the knowledge and skills about writing assessment that are specified in the assessment section of the School Writing Plan** (Graham & Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003). Such assessment activities might include: (a) screening all students' writing skills at least annually, (b) collecting brief writing samples periodically to determine students' writing progress and/or diagnose their instructional needs, and (c) collecting writing samples in a portfolio to document mastery or the continuing need for instruction in specific genres (NCTE, 2008).

## Function 4: School Leaders Allocate and Manage School Resources to Support High-quality Writing Instruction

Writing assessment and differentiated writing instruction, both key components of any effort to improve the writing skills of all students, require significant **staff time for scoring writing assessments and for remedial instruction**. Significant progress in improving writing outcomes for a wide range of students cannot occur without dedicating staff time to this purpose (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Therefore, principals must find and allocate additional human resources for scoring writing assessments (National Commission on Writing, 2006) and for tutoring and mentoring students who need additional support to develop proficiency. **Finding additional time for scoring assessments, additional instruction, and related professional development is a challenging undertaking.**

Finding and appropriately **structuring time**, however, is critical to helping students develop essential skills for overall writing success. As an initial consideration, schools might begin by coordinating the efforts of all instructional staff (classroom teachers, instructional specialists, EL staff and instructional assistants) around the goal of improving all students' writing skills. By organizing around a common set of goals, staff time can be streamlined through a common investment in resources.

When thinking about resource management, another area to consider is **how writing assessment is scored**. For example, scoring teams can be created to score student writing, more dedicated time can be allocated to specific teachers to score students' writing assessments, or scoring can be prioritized by only scoring the writing targets that are being assessed by that particular assessment. To further help with resources, some schools include **qualified (and trained) assistants or volunteers** to supplement writing instruction for students needing additional help. Peer review strategies (used after students are taught how to review each other's work) can also supplement – but should never replace – teacher feedback. None of the above suggestions is perfect or can stand alone as a solution to challenges with time and

resource management. School leaders, therefore, must also explore creative strategies to help address the resources required to support the writing assessment and remediation specified in the School Writing Plan.

**Time may be the single most important variable** that contributes to the improvement of writing outcomes. Although time is an elusive variable, it is one that school leaders can control. National reports on improving writing instruction are unanimous in the recommendation that schedules are arranged to significantly **increase the time devoted to writing** (Graham & Hebert, 2010), and to protect that time from any potential interruption.

Perhaps the best way to increase time dedicated to writing is exemplified by the design of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA) & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: the Common Core not only includes ELA standards but also Literacy Standards for content-area reading and writing. **Integrating writing more closely with reading** and English language development (for English Learners) makes good sense to improve literacy. **If writing instruction is coordinated across grade levels and subject areas, writing time can be increased significantly** (National Commission on Writing, 2003).

In addition to the resource issues of staffing and time, an essential resource required for strong writing instruction is **technology**. Multiple reports, such as the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, and the National Council of Teachers of English, recommend using technology to enhance student writing (Graham & Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003). Word processing, and the related “Office” toolkit, is the most common application of technology for writing. Other forms of technology, such as facilitative software and peripherals (voice to print, “mind mapping,” audio recording and similar tools), can also be helpful to many students. As technology resources become increasingly available and more affordable, school leaders can improve current “technology to student ratios,” thereby facilitating students’ writing development at more modest costs.

## **Function 5: School Leaders Provide Effective Professional Development (Training, Collaboration, Supervision and Support) to Support Improved Writing Instruction**

All staff members who teach writing must have **solid foundational knowledge about writing instruction**. (Graham & Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003). A solid foundational knowledge includes: (a) familiarity with the writing process, (b) knowledge of specific strategies for increasing particular writing skills, (c) understanding genre-specific writing modes, and (d) the ability to apply motivational strategies for engaging young and/or struggling writers. In addition to ensuring that this body of knowledge exists for all staff, school leaders must find a way to provide professional development to new staff members.

Experts recommend that **ongoing writing training should focus primarily on collaboration and coaching models in which teachers share information and ideas** (National Commission on Writing, 2003). On-going professional development can also emphasize the **data-based decision-making process** by focusing on how to review writing data, collaboratively plan writing lessons based on assessment data, observe how **collaboratively-planned lessons** are implemented in the classroom, and provide research-based feedback about observed lessons. Because writing is also an effective tool to

improve reading, **professional development can also focus on how the K-12 CCSS for Writing and Reading strategically integrate writing and reading in the standards, and how writing and reading can be optimally integrated during instruction.** Overall, effective school leaders provide supervision to ensure that on-going professional development is implemented and resources are available to support the effectiveness of any training initiative.

The focus of **professional development is also directed by student performance data** (Applebee & Langer, 2006). Specifically, professional development should focus on the documented difference between the applicable standards and/or stated writing goals for a group of students and the skills they currently demonstrate. If student writing shows consistent difficulty with a certain writing trait, such as ideas and content, or reveals a weakness in a certain mode such as argument, leaders might consider devoting further training to improving instruction related to those specific needs. Similarly, teacher collaboration might focus on addressing a need that has become apparent in students' writing samples. When thinking about the needs of *all* learners, and English learners in particular, relative to the Common Core Language Standards—professional development should focus on how to teach grammar, syntax, and English language conventions.

Leaders also work to establish a positive school culture so everyone can “share what they know and to learn from what colleagues know” (National Commission on Writing, 2003). A collective, learning-based culture can be informed by **instructional walk-throughs**. Instructional walk-throughs are similar to coaching in function. Both leaders and teachers participate in a collaborative process that includes brief, but focused, classroom visits that are always followed by a conversation about the classroom visit. The post-visit discussion focuses on effective practices as well as something to target for improvement. While it would be ideal to have a writing coach available to work with all teachers, few schools can afford to implement a fully-specified coaching model. With minimal release time, leaders and teachers can collaboratively participate in the walk-through process. By implementing walk-throughs on an ongoing basis, a school-wide culture emphasizing collaboration and continuous improvement in writing instruction is created at a very modest cost.

Finally, leaders create a culture within the school in which **adults** (leaders, teachers, non-certified staff, parents, and other stakeholders) **constantly model the practice of writing both in work and daily life.** Leaders can show staff and students a written piece by another writer and explain why they think that particular piece is meaningful and discuss how the author conveyed his/her message. Not all written products need to be formal documents or award-winning manuscripts. Therefore, the writing process can be modeled with a variety of different types of writing, writing created for different audiences, and writing written for different purposes. Most importantly, modeling writing at the school-level can demonstrate to students that writing, often thought to be something to be avoided at all costs, is actually a useful skill—and possibly even an intriguing—enterprise. Such a revelation, coupled with good writing instruction, will motivate more students to view the written word in powerful new ways.

## Summary

### **What makes the difference between routine results and accelerated achievement in writing?**

School leadership makes changes to the five variables that directly and significantly impact student outcomes in writing.

## References

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